



Coffee Break Training - Fire Investigation Series

Fire/Arson and Explosion Investigation Curriculum: Fire Scene Documentation

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Learning Objective: The student shall be able to identify the five types of fire scene documentation and their significance in supporting a successful arson prosecution.

The successful prosecution of arson cases begins at the fire scene and can be doomed for failure unless the scene is thoroughly and properly documented. A coordinated effort between first responders and fire investigators is an essential first step in building an arson case that leads to a successful prosecution. Proper documentation of a fire scene requires a systematic approach on the part of first responders and fire investigators. More importantly, it requires an understanding and recognition of the documentation needed to not only establish the fire cause, but to also develop the connecting evidence that will identify and ultimately convict the person(s) responsible for setting the fire.



Timely and thorough fire scene documentation is a crucial element for a successful arson prosecution.

One of the most common mistakes made in the investigation of fire scenes is the failure to examine and thoroughly document the entire scene. Investigators should be intimately familiar with the fire scene documentation guidelines outlined in National Fire Protection Association 921, *Guide for Fire and Explosion Investigations*. Adherence to these guidelines helps demonstrate the investigator's methodology in analyzing the fire scene, establishes his or her expertise as a fire investigator, and brings credibility to the expert opinions of the fire investigator at trial.

Comprehensive documentation of the fire scene investigation is the best defense against potential claims of bias. The five common types of fire scene documentation include:

- Notes
- Sketches/Diagrams
- Photographs
- Investigative reports
- Videotape

Investigators should consult with prosecutors and understand the rules within their respective jurisdictions concerning the admissibility of demonstrative evidence. This type of evidence offers the advantage of capturing a critical aspect of the fire scene such as a significant burn pattern or artifact in the area of origin. The use of demonstrative evidence at trial is a critical tool in effectively presenting a case in court. It captures the attention of the triers of fact and focuses them on the evidence referenced in the investigator's testimony. In addition, it brings a scientific and objective perspective to the investigator's testimony and evidence which the jury must consider in reaching its verdict.

Additional information on fire scene documentation can be obtained from the *Documenting the Event* online training module at www.cfttrainer.net.

For archived downloads, go to: